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Creating value from uncertainty

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Tutorial note: Enhancing team effectiveness

It is often necessary to draw a team together and change unhelpful behaviour or re-establish its focus. This paper describes the use of risk management concepts and processes to enhance team effectiveness. It is based on observations over many years of both coincidental and planned improvements in team effectiveness that have been achieved in this way.

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1 Team effectiveness

Pressures of routine work can limit a team's ability to pay attention to how well it is working as opposed to what it is working on. Simply pointing this out to people is rarely sufficient to make them more aware of how they are functioning and a direct approach to the problem is not always successful. There is a real danger that attempts to change the way people work will be interpreted as criticism of their efforts to date, stimulating self-justification rather than improvement. An oblique approach is often more effective.

Individuals in a team are expected to pull together but they always retain some autonomy, even in the most rigid hierarchical organisations, and they change their behaviour according to the way they interact with one another. Teamwork is complex. No one can be completely certain what will emerge from the interactions between team members and there is no simple way to understand or control their behaviour. Constant attention is required to ensure that a team remains productive.

Sometimes it is necessary to intervene to ensure that members of a team are:

- Working towards the same objectives and the same view of what will be regarded as success;
- Informed about one another's work and challenges;
- Using the same assumptions; and
- Aware of the constraints and objectives that should guide their work.

Observations over many years have shown that risk management processes produce valuable improvements in team effectiveness without confronting team members in ways that might stimulate a negative response. This can be exploited tactically to motivate a team to review its attitudes and plans, to take a realistic view of how effective the members are as a group, and break the deadlock of decision paralysis.

2 Improving effectiveness

Presenting a team intervention in terms of risk avoids it being seen as criticism because it depersonalises the exercise. It provides a short-term focus that can be used to engage people and draw them out of entrained patterns of daily activities so that they can see more clearly what is actually going on in their work.

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The short-term focus of generating risk management outputs, combined with a structured process and suitable facilitation, engages people and motivates them to participate. Documented feedback reinforces the effects of their involvement and makes a concrete contribution to the team's primary role.

3 Outcomes

Attention to risk management can be used selectively to improve:

- Agreement on scope, especially on which peripheral matters are and are not relevant;
- Shared understanding and agreement about objectives and priorities;
- A sense of responsibility for pursuing those objectives; and
- Understanding of strengths and weaknesses of existing efforts.

Tangible outcomes created at the same time include:

- Valuable exchanges of factual information;
- Improved understanding of the perspectives of other team members;
- Resolution of mismatched expectations; and
- Agreement on priorities for concrete actions with clear owners.

Teams are formed to deliver something and, while part of their work might be predictable, they are buffeted by the uncertainty that is part of any meaningful activity. It is no accident that a risk assessment or related exercise can produce a beneficial effect on a team's effectiveness. The framework and the team drive in the same direction, towards a successful outcome, despite the uncertainty affecting a task.

The methods outlined here all rely on:

- A clearly identified short-term goal;
- A structured process with facilitation;
- Documented outputs that deliver value to the participants and reinforce the effects of the facilitated exercise.

While there are many ways to exploit the connection between team effectiveness and risk management, three examples cover the most common cases:

- Framing a project or an organisation's work to place everyone in a team on a common footing;
- Establishing priorities for action that are closely aligned with overall success; and
- Breaking the deadlock of decision paralysis.

4 Framing the task

4.1 Requirement

What does success mean?

Some teams lose or never develop a common view of the purpose of their work. They might feel aimless or hold very strong but divergent individual views about what they should be seeking to achieve.

It is rarely sufficient to simply describe a common goal and paint a picture of what a successful outcome would look like, especially if a team has been in existence for some time. If they can be involved in describing what success means, they will inevitably be more committed to it than if it is just delivered as a note or an instruction.

What are we responsible for?

Misunderstandings about what is in and what is out of scope arise frequently. Less common, but not rare, are teams in which some members actively seek to shift the boundary to include or exclude something for their own reasons.

Individuals might feel that it makes sense to rectify problems in a related area while completing their primary task, even if the original scope and budget did not include those problems. Conversely, they might feel that something they have been asked to deal with is insignificant or unworthy of attention and should be excluded.

Even superficially small disagreements about scope can interfere with effective teamwork. They can distort planning and priority setting to a surprising extent. No good can come from having different views about the scope informing different parts of a team's work.

What forces are at work?

Every project or organisation is subject to external and internal forces that could result in better or worse outcomes than planned. Awareness of these matters tends to be dominated by a team member's functional expertise and

experience. Engineers will know well the technical challenges, business analysts will be conscious of financial pressures, lawyers will focus on legal and regulatory requirements, and human resources specialists will think of staffing and compliance with labour law.

It is impractical to suggest that everyone should be fully informed about every detail of their colleagues' work but it is rare to find a team that comes anywhere near this state. Great benefits can flow from improving mutual understanding and raising the awareness of the team about all the challenges they face.

4.2 Approach

Each of the three parts of the requirement (success criteria, scope, and the influence of contextual factors) plays a key role in initiating risk management, an exercise called establishing the context. The correspondence between teamwork and risk management for these three topics is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Context

Topic	Team effectiveness	Risk management
Success criteria	Direction and focus	Basis for defining risk and analysing the consequences of risks
Scope	Effort allocation (team and personal)	Risk identification and relevance
Internal and external factors	Basis for planning	Trigger for risk identification

A straightforward risk management context setting exercise routinely brings about a significant improvement in a team's sense of common purpose, clarity about their objectives, and awareness of all the factors that need to be borne in mind to achieve a successful outcome.

It can be framed as a risk management exercise to provide a safe rationale for carrying it out. Alternatively, it can be explained in terms of the outputs it generates, a framing exercise for a project or the future of an organisation. In either case, it improves a team's understanding of the task they face and draws them together as a group.

4.3 Process

Context setting, or framing, is best addressed by drafting a summary of success criteria, scope and influential factors and then facilitating a review of these with the team. Scope and factors influencing the work are relatively straightforward. Success criteria have more depth.

Success criteria might be simply documented as a list. However, a little time spent characterising variations from planned outcomes, better or worse than planned for each criterion, makes it clear how sensitive the team is, or should be, to such deviations. This might involve, in part, describing how bad a negative variation would need to be to throw the team's continued existence into doubt or, conversely, how large a positive variation would need to be to win them recognition for extraordinary achievement. Describing smaller levels of positive or negative variations that would be regarded as significant can enrich this picture.

An example for one success criterion, accessibility of a government service for community stakeholders, is illustrated in Table 2, where level 1 is the most significant and level 5 the least significant variation from the planned outcome.

Table 2: Example of success criterion measures

Level	Positive variation	Negative variation
1	No member of the community faces any barrier at all to accessing the service	Accessibility is so poor that the viability of the service is called into question
2	Most people find accessing the service easier	A significant proportion of the population finds the service practically inaccessible
3	Specific groups find access to the service improved	Specific groups face severe systemic barriers accessing the service
4	A small number of people find it easier to access the service	Isolated instances of significant individual problems with accessibility
5	Minor improvements in accessibility that might not be generally apparent	Minor accessibility difficulties for a small number of people

This is the information required to prepare risk consequence rating scales. It also encapsulates a team or organisation's risk appetite, which can be used to guide personal decision-making and priority-setting.

Once documented, the outcome of the facilitated review offers a summary of the foundations for decision making on the project. Team members have a

stake in this position and can use it to focus their own work and manage their joint effort.

5 Priority setting

5.1 Requirement

Resources are always constrained. A means is required to assist in allocating what is available.

A team can find that priorities set by their managers, usually expressed in terms of which tasks to complete first, conflict with what they believe is important. This has a corrosive effect on motivation and commitment no matter who is correct. If the team is correct and managers are misguided, resources will be wasted. If the managers are correct and the team do not believe them, motivation will suffer.

Along with whatever planning and forecasting systems are in use, the context setting or framing process described in the previous section will help a team think clearly about where resources should be allocated. This is a good start.

A facilitated risk assessment provides a basis for exploring these matters further. It is important to be able to expose and describe each significant concern or area of uncertainty about work priorities, but there is always a danger of the exercise descending into the airing of grievances. Sound structuring of the assessment and good facilitation are vital to keeping it focussed and on track.

5.2 Approach

A straightforward risk assessment allows actual and perceived discrepancies between the challenges a team faces and their resource allocation to be brought out and discussed without personalising the matter. The information gathered while establishing the context provides an objective basis for determining whether a concern is real or arises from a misunderstanding. Enough time can be devoted to any contentious topic to describe it and assess its importance while the structured process limits loose discussion and gratuitous complaints.

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If there is any concern about resource allocation, it will quickly become apparent. Where it is felt that insufficient resources are available currently, someone will usually raise a risk and assert that control will be lost or necessary outcomes will not be achieved in that area. Where it is felt that an area has been allocated more resources than it needs, someone concerned with other parts of the team's responsibilities might raise a risk about that and comment on the unequal resource allocation. In either case, framing the perceived problem as a risk and rating it using the output of the context setting can test its importance.

Straightforward risk assessments routinely resolve long running arguments about priorities. They do this not by force of authority but by improving understanding. Honestly held but misplaced concerns generally fade away with little argument when tested against agreed success criteria. Conversely, significant concerns that had not been visible or well-communicated to senior managers are placed on a rational footing and can be escalated with confidence.

5.3 Process

Where a team is well grounded and the matters described in Section 4 (success, scope and influential factors) are well understood, the context may be drawn up by the team leader and the facilitator without the team's involvement. However, if the team's understanding of these matters is fragmented or deficient, it may be necessary to address the context with them first. In either case, a risk assessment exercise, properly facilitated, can then provide a mechanism for reviewing priorities in a calm and efficient manner.

Advice on priorities generated by such an exercise usually falls into three areas.

1. High risks requiring an investigation into what can be done to reduce the severity of those with undesirable consequences and capitalise on those with desirable consequences or, where this is not possible by any practicable means, to ensure that the risks are taken into account by the governance processes within which the team operates.
2. Risks, often including some not at the highest level of severity, desirable or undesirable, where it is clear that the team is not yet doing all it could to deliver a good outcome are highlighted so that the cost-effectiveness of taking further action can be examined.
3. Risks that are well controlled but generate concern because there could be very significant consequences if the controls were relaxed or failed, are

identified so that the team can consider how to ensure this does not happen.

6 Decision paralysis

6.1 Requirement

Decision paralysis is a common problem – being unable to make a decision, or to get those in authority to make one, and so being unable to make progress. It can undermine a team's motivation, productivity and commitment. The team might be held up by a choice between well-defined options, such as which form of procurement to use for a major purchase, or by a simple lack of direction that leaves them floundering. This might be perceived as having too many options.

Common reasons for decision paralysis, where time is absorbed by extended analysis and discussion with no resolution, include:

- Fear that the selected option will not turn out well;
- Anxiety about picking the very best option even though there might not be much to choose between them, a desire to optimise rather than satisfice;
- Pressure from influential stakeholders to adopt an option that others regard as a bad choice.

6.2 Approach

Where the options are clear

Decision paralysis is often due to a preoccupation with what might go wrong, despite having clear options to consider. A comparative risk assessment is a straightforward means of breaking the deadlock, not least because it can go directly to the root causes of that fear.

Assessing the risk associated with each option detaches the analysis from the personal concerns and entrenched positions of the personnel concerned. Using a straightforward extension of a standard risk assessment, risks are identified for all options and analysed in the context of each of them. The result is a summary of the risks the team would face in each case, illustrated at a very high level in Table 3.

Table 3: Comparative risk assessment summary

Risk	Option A	Option B	Option C
Risk description 1	Red	Green	Red
Risk description 2	Green	Green	Yellow
Risk description 3	Red	Yellow	Green
Risk description 4	Yellow	Red	Yellow
Risk description 5	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
Risk description 6	Red	Green	Yellow

Where the options are unclear

There can appear to be too many options when a team has choices about several factors at once. For instance, it may be possible to achieve their objectives by delivering a large number of small outcomes over an extended period or in a shorter period by waiting until everything can be delivered at once. Within these two strategies, there may be further options relating to geographical segmentation, doing work in-house or employing contractors, technical alternatives and other factors.

In these cases, with a team unable to set out clear options and decide how to proceed, formulating strategic options that encapsulate the choices to be made and making a comparative risk assessment of those options often results in a preferred direction being discovered.

The options need not be fully worked proposals that could be implemented as they stand. Since they encapsulate the choices to be made, once the team has carried out a risk assessment on them it will be clear where their strengths and weaknesses lie. Generally, the team will then be able to select the best features from each of the options to make a firm proposal for a way forward.

6.3 Process

Where the reason for decision paralysis is having too many choices to make, representative options have to be prepared first. To illustrate what this could mean, a set of options might include one that is seen as a quick and low quality way forward and one that is methodical and high quality. In each case, outcomes might be produced incrementally or in a single large delivery, resulting in four options in all. These are characteristic options, not fully worked solutions, and they provide a basis for assessing which general approach to take

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so that a fully-fledged option can be developed and the deadlock can be broken.

Preparation for a comparative risk assessment is very similar to that for a standard risk assessment although it might take a little longer. Care is required to ensure that the context statement does not favour one option over another. Similarly, the facilitation of the risk identification and analysis has to be handled carefully to avoid bias.

Interpretation of the outputs may be a little more complex than with a simple risk assessment of one scenario or strategy. There is more to it than simply counting the number of high risks assigned to each option.

For example, the nature of the risks affecting each of the options might be quite different from one to another. One option might present some major risks that will all be resolved in the short term while another might lead to risks that will persist for years. One option might present mostly management challenges while another is dominated by technical concerns.

A decision usually emerges naturally from a consideration of the risks and how important they are for each of the options. This formal output of the exercise is underpinned by raised levels of awareness and understanding that the team develops through their participation in the analysis.

7 Summary

Tactical use of risk management interventions can:

- Motivate a team to review their attitudes and plans;
- Help them take a realistic view of how effective they are as a group; and
- Break them out of the deadlock of decision paralysis.

Presenting an intervention as a project or planning framing exercise, or as a risk assessment with its associated activities, avoids confronting personnel with suggestions that they are not performing well. It works because people are taken out of their routine activity if only for a short time, entrained patterns of thought that prevent them from seeing where they are not working effectively are disrupted and a structure is provided within which they can explore and agree on priorities.

8 Contacts

If you would like further information about this topic please contact us. We will endeavour to reply within 48 hours.

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